UNCSW Study Guide for Simulations of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) at the NUST International Model United Nations

Promoting Gender Equity in Policy and Decision Making

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Mandate of UNCSW

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) is a key body working on the establishment of gender equality in the world.

Established on June 21, 1946 under the ECOSOC Resolution 11 (II), it's the principal intergovernmental body dedicated to this goal. UNCSW holds an annual two-week session at the UN headquarters in New York. Here, representatives from member states, civil society organizations, and UN entities come together.

Their goals are to:

- Discuss progress made on achieving gender equality.

- Identify areas where there are still challenges.

- Set global standards for gender equality.

- Formulate concrete policies to advance women's rights worldwide.

Through the years of the commission's functioning, various conclusions and agreements have been made based on the priority theme and concrete recommendations have been provided to governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions. The commision collaborates with relevant stakeholders and civil society actors like NGOs, non-profit organizations, community groups, labor and employee unions to uplift women and promote gender equality.

UNCSW has played a significant role in shaping international agreements and policies on gender equality. The Commission's work is important because gender equality benefits everyone. It leads to stronger economies, promotes peace and security, and improves the overall well-being of society.

Introduction to the Agenda

Promoting Gender Equity in Policy and Decision Making

"You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race, and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." ([Johnson, 1965](#))

In countries around the world, movements to establish democratic forms of government increasingly influence international affairs and development strategies. Organizations and community groups are continuously finding ways to promote "good governance" that support and respect the voices and interests of a range of citizens. As detailed in this study guide, the full involvement of women in political and economic arenas is also gaining ground as a legitimate goal, as well as a litmus test of the degree to which democracy has been attained. [1]

Women are underrepresented in politics. They make up half of the population of every country in the world, however, the worldwide average percentage of women in national parliaments is only 26.9% [2].

As of 1 October 2024, there are 29 countries where 30 women serve as Heads of State and/or Government [3]. Meanwhile, women are 20.54% of ambassadors to the United Nations [4] and at the current rate of progress, gender parity in national legislative bodies will not be achieved before 2063 [5].

As a democratic political culture expands worldwide, it is increasingly important to examine how women—and often the institutions to which they belong—take on new roles and identities, develop new skills, claim individual and collective rights, participate in public decision making processes, and establish an equal footing with their male counterparts.

The lasting impact of women's increased mobilization and political participation will ultimately be seen at the level of the individual as women everywhere gain a heightened political consciousness and come to believe in the possibility of transformation. At the national level, the political discourse will be altered to the point at which gender issues will be a shared concern of

a broad spectrum of political groups. In the long run, the broader the participation in the democratic discourse, the more likely it will be that a society's development choices will reflect the needs and concerns of all its citizens. [6]

Key words

Gender Equity: Gender equity refers to structural factors such as access to education and antidiscrimination policies that provide equal societal opportunities for women and men.

Gender Equality: Gender equality refers to the recognition and promotion of equal rights and opportunities for individuals of all genders, with the aim of achieving economic development and social justice.

Gender Parity: Gender parity concerns relative equality in terms of numbers and proportions of women and men, girls and boys, and is often calculated as the ratio of female-to-male values for a given indicator.

Gender Mainstreaming: Gender mainstreaming means integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies, programmes and projects.

Intersectionality: The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.

Women's empowerment: The fostering of a woman's sense of self-worth, her decision-making power, her access to opportunities and resources, her power and control over her own life inside and outside the home, and her ability to effect change.

Historical Background

The journey towards gender equity in governance has been marked by significant milestones and persistent struggles. From the exclusion of women in ancient political systems to the global suffrage movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, women have fought for their right to participate in political life. Key international frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW, and the Beijing Declaration, have played crucial roles in advocating for women's rights. Despite these advancements, women continue to face numerous barriers, including legal, social, cultural, and economic challenges. Understanding this historical context is essential for appreciating the progress made and recognizing the ongoing efforts needed to achieve true gender equity in policy and decision-making.

1)   The Suffrage Movement

Since the time of the world's first democracy in ancient Greece through the mid-1800s, political thinkers excluded women from notions of citizenship and male lawmakers from extensions of democratic rights. Politics was the domain of men, and women were thought to lack the qualities and capabilities necessary for equal citizenship. Furthermore, religious doctrine or practice and cultural traditions regarding women's proper place in society served as barriers to women's political participation. It was only following decades of struggle that women in many countries achieved suffrage, or the right to vote. [7]

While the word suffrage, derived from the Latin "suffragium," simply refers to the right to vote, the modern connotation specifically calls to mind the women's suffrage movements from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century.

Part of the larger social movement of Women's Rights and the fight for equality within patriarchal societies, the Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States spans a seventy-two year period that mirrored similar struggles throughout Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

After World War I, more countries throughout the world, including those in South and Central America, Africa, and Asia, began including women in the electoral process. An important note is that not all countries have elections due to their national form of government. [8]

The enfranchisement of women was the primary goal of first-wave feminism, which generally covers the time from the late 19th through the early 20th century. The term 'first wave' is used to distinguish early women's movements from the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although women in many countries won the right to vote during feminism's first wave, in parts of the world the struggle continues. [7]

2) International Frameworks

Once women had the right to vote, they had a voice in politics for the first time. They were formally represented in power, having the legal right to participate in politics on an equal basis with men.

Today, women can formally participate in politics almost everywhere, and resolution statements are much stronger, taking for granted the notion that women can and should participate.

a) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a milestone document in the history of human rights. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, the Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A) as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations.

In specific, we talk about Article 21 of the UDHR, which states "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives." [9]

b) CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979):

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is an international legal instrument that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas and promotes women's and girls' equal rights. [10]

Particularly, we talk on Article 7 of CEDAW (11)

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in

the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

(a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;

(b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;

(c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

c) The Beijing Declaration Act (1995):

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995, marked a turning point in global efforts to advance gender equality. This historic agreement, endorsed by 189 countries, established a comprehensive framework for addressing systemic barriers to women's rights and empowerment. A powerful statement from the declaration asserted that *"No government can claim to be democratic until women are guaranteed the right to equal representation"* (United Nations, 1995).

The declaration called on nations to take bold and transformative steps to achieve gender balance in all sectors of governance and public administration. Governments committed to setting concrete targets and implementing measures to significantly increase the number of women in decision-making positions. This included achieving gender balance in governmental bodies, committees, public administrative entities, and the judiciary. It emphasized that where necessary, positive action—such as quotas or other affirmative measures—should be used to ensure equal representation of women and men.

The Beijing Platform for Action recognized that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also essential for the functioning of democratic societies. The document outlined strategic objectives to combat discrimination, reduce gender-based violence, enhance women's access to education and health, and ensure their full participation in economic and political spheres. By identifying specific areas of concern and offering actionable steps, the declaration served as a blueprint for governments, organizations, and civil society to work collaboratively

toward gender equity.

Nearly three decades later, the Beijing Declaration remains a cornerstone of international gender advocacy, serving as a reminder that true democracy and progress depend on the inclusion of women in all aspects of governance and society. While significant strides have been made since 1995, the world continues to grapple with the challenges of underrepresentation and systemic inequality, underscoring the ongoing relevance of the commitments made in Beijing. [12]

d) SDG 5: Gender Equality (2015):

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) of the United Nations aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Gender equality is essential for sustainable development, as it allows women to reach their full potential and contribute to their communities and economies.

Effective policy making to achieve gender equality demands broad political participation. Yet women's representation in single or lower houses of parliament in countries around the world was only 23.4 per cent in 2017, just 10 percentage points higher than in 2000.

Even in the two regions most advanced in terms of women's representation—Australia and New Zealand and Latin America and the Caribbean—women occupy fewer than one out of three seats in parliament. Northern Africa and Western Asia has made impressive advances: the proportion of seats held by women rose nearly fourfold between 2000 and 2017. Nevertheless, women still hold fewer than one in five parliamentary seats in the region.

Slow progress suggests that stronger political will and more ambitious measures are needed. Quotas to boost women's political participation and empowerment have been helpful: 75 out of 190 countries (39 per cent) have used some form of quota system to increase women's representation, and election results in 2016 show that the strategy is working. However, quotas may also impose a false ceiling on women's representation; they therefore need to be periodically reviewed and updated to ensure continued progress.

Women are also underrepresented in managerial positions, especially in senior and middle management. In most of the 67 countries with data from 2009 to 2015, less than a third of senior- and middle-management positions were held by women. Modest improvements can be observed in some countries. Over the past decade, the share of women in senior and middle management

increased in about half of the countries with available data. However, the proportion of women in these positions remains significantly lower than the share of women in total employment for all of the countries studied. The data also suggest that more women are in junior- rather than middle- or senior-management positions and need to break through the glass ceiling in order to reach top-echelon positions. [13]

Ending Note

Even though most countries of the world grant women the equal opportunity to vote and to participate in politics, women remain substantially underrepresented in positions of political decision making. More than 99% of countries in the world have granted women the formal right to vote and the formal right to stand for election. But as noted earlier, fewer countries have more than 20% women in their legislative bodies. Equal opportunity through formal representation does not appear to automatically produce large numbers of women in politics.

In principle, laws can ensure that women have an equal opportunity to vote and to pursue political careers. In practice, however, women may not come to the starting line with the same resources or skills as men, and this can result in differences in outcomes, even without differences in opportunity. (Paxton and Hughes, 2009)

That is where the issue of gender equity in policies and decision making comes into play.

The Importance of Gender Equity in Policies and Decision Making

Gender equity is a fundamental human right, yet our world still struggles with significant gaps between men and women when it comes to access to opportunities and decision-making power. Women globally face fewer chances to participate in the economy, less access to education, increased health and safety risks, and minimal representation in politics. Addressing these disparities isn't just about fairness—it's crucial for achieving broader development goals. When women and girls are empowered, they help build healthier families, stronger communities, and more prosperous nations, creating a ripple effect that benefits everyone.

Gender refers to the roles and expectations that societies assign to men and women. Gender equity means providing men and women with equal power and opportunities to achieve financial independence, education, and personal growth. A key part of achieving gender equity is empowering women—helping them build self-confidence, gain decision-making power, access resources, and take control of their lives both at home and in society. However, gender equity isn't only about women; it also involves fostering a more balanced relationship between men and women. Men and boys must play an active role in changing attitudes and behaviors that support equality.

Education is one of the most critical areas in this journey. While progress has been made globally in achieving gender parity in education, girls are still more likely than boys to be out of school, especially in developing regions. About one-quarter of girls in these areas do not attend school. In families with limited resources, educating sons is often prioritized, while daughters are expected to help with household chores like fetching water or caring for siblings. This lack of education for girls is a missed opportunity since investing in girls' education yields incredible benefits. Educated girls tend to marry later, have smaller families, ensure their children are healthier, and are more likely to send their children to school. They also have better income opportunities, greater political participation, and are less likely to contract HIV.

Health and safety are also significant challenges for women. The issue of HIV/AIDS, for example, disproportionately affects women, often because of unequal power dynamics, limited health education, or exposure to gender-based violence. Maternal health is another critical concern, especially in countries where girls marry and have children before the age of 18. Access to quality maternal healthcare can help women make informed decisions about their health and their children's well-being, ultimately empowering them further.

Another important aspect of gender equity is improving women's economic and political empowerment. Despite making up over half of the global population, women own just 1% of the world's wealth. Across the globe, women perform long hours of unpaid domestic work and often face barriers to owning land, inheriting property, accessing credit, and advancing in their careers without discrimination. They are also underrepresented in decision-making roles, both at home and in public life. In legislative bodies worldwide, men outnumber women four to one. Yet,

women's voices in politics are essential for achieving gender equality and fostering true democracy.

Even in developed nations like the United States, gender equity remains an issue. The U.S. ranks 19th on the World Economic Forum's gender gap index. Women make up less than 20% of elected members in Congress, highlighting political empowerment as a significant challenge. Economically, women's earning power is still about 20% lower than men's. On a brighter note, U.S. women have a high ranking in education, with more women attending college than men.

Globally, no country has completely closed the gender gap. Scandinavian countries like Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden are leading the way, with more equitable distribution of income, resources, and opportunities between men and women. On the other hand, the largest gaps remain in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. Still, some nations in these areas, like Lesotho, South Africa, and Sri Lanka, have made notable progress and even outrank the United States in gender equality.

Evaluation of Gender Equity in Global Policies

Despite decades of progress, women and marginalized genders continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their participation in governance, leadership, and decision-making roles. As the world approaches the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development deadline, achieving gender equality remains an unfulfilled promise.

Legal discrimination, cultural biases, workplace inequality, and limited representation in politics, media, and technology reflect deep-seated structural inequalities. Women enjoy fewer than two-thirds the rights of men globally, and even where legal frameworks exist, implementation gaps persist. Addressing these obstacles is not only a matter of justice but also critical for fostering inclusive development, innovation, and democracy.

This study examines the barriers women encounter across various sectors and explores actionable strategies to dismantle these inequities and promote gender-balanced leadership worldwide.

1)   Legal Barriers & Workplace Discrimination

The elimination of discriminatory legislation and the establishment of robust legal frameworks that advance gender equality are fundamental prerequisites for eradicating discrimination against women and achieving the commitments outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 5. Legal reform is indispensable for ensuring women's equitable participation in the workforce and fostering inclusive prosperity.

A recent report by the World Bank Group underscores the profound disparities in workplace rights globally, revealing that the gender gap is far more significant than previously estimated. When accounting for critical factors such as protections against violence and access to childcare, women possess fewer than two-thirds of the rights afforded to men. Alarmingly, no country, regardless of its economic standing, provides women with equal opportunities in the workplace.

The Women, Business and the Law report offers a comprehensive examination of the barriers that women face in accessing the global workforce and contributing meaningfully to economic development. By expanding its analytical scope to include safety from violence and childcare accessibility, the report highlights that, on average, women enjoy merely 64% of the legal protections available to men—a stark decline from the prior estimate of 77%.

However, the challenges extend beyond legal provisions. For the first time, the report evaluates the discrepancy between legislative reform and its practical implementation in 190 economies. This analysis reveals a substantial implementation gap: while legislative measures suggest that women hold approximately two-thirds of the rights available to men, only 40% of the systems necessary to enforce these rights have been established. For instance, although 98 economies have enacted legislation mandating equal pay for work of equal value, fewer than one in five— just 35 economies—have introduced mechanisms such as pay transparency or enforcement tools to address wage disparities effectively.

The realization of equal opportunity laws requires more than statutory enactment; it necessitates the establishment of comprehensive enforcement mechanisms, systematic monitoring of gender-related pay disparities, and the provision of essential support services, including healthcare for survivors of violence. These foundational components are vital for transforming legislative intent into tangible outcomes and ensuring that gender equality in the workplace is achieved.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women reiterates that concerted efforts to close the gender gap in workplace rights are critical to advancing global gender equality and empowering women worldwide. [14]

2) Social and Cultural Barriers

Harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation persist. Globally, one in five young women is married before age 18. The prevalence of child marriage highlights the need for attitudinal shifts and the promotion of legal frameworks that safeguard women and girls' rights. [15]

Cultural Influences on Gender Equity :

Due to this discrepancy between different countries, culture can be understood as a key influencing factor in supporting women as leaders. Today, we live in a connected and globalized world where one can notice an "increased interdependence (economic, social, technical and political) between nations". This means that trade, culture as well as communication goes beyond borders and people are more interconnected than ever before. In this way, successful leadership is not considered to be the same in every country and culture. Hence, culture specific aspects have to be taken into account when leading across countries and respective cultures.

An important factor that has to be kept in mind when talking about female leadership and culture is gender equality. According to UNESCO (2020), the advancement of gender equality is connected with the specific culture. From this, it can be inferred that culture and the respective Gender Equality Index, which measures the complex construct of gender equality, have an impact on women ascending the career ladder as well as occupying upper management positions (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). Therefore, culture impacts women's possibilities and opportunities in leadership (Paoloni & Lombardi, 2018).

The United Nations call gender equality and the herewith connected equal treatment of men and women in various areas of life "an unfinished business of our time" (United Nations, 2020a). For instance, there is a lack of women's real progress toward gender equality in poor countries, much of which is due to patriarchal societies and negative cultural attitudes toward women and girls. The European Union scored 64.7 points out of 100 in the Gender Equality Index and 72.0 points

in the domain of work (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019). This underlines that even in the most developed countries, there is a lot of room for improvement for gender equality and equal access to jobs in management as well as business. That is why the United Nations also included gender equality and "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making" in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2020b).

To conclude, gender equality varies from one country to another which is due to different cultural understandings when it comes to the roles of men and women and the respective gender expectations (United Nations, 2020a; Eden & Forquer Gupta, 2017).

These cultural differences result in divergent career opportunities for women and might harm female leadership in extreme cases. This is especially true for underdeveloped or developing poor countries as they often have male dominated cultures. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that culture and environment heavily impact female leadership and women's representation in upper management positions.

The Gender Inequality Index gives an indication of opportunities women face in the workplace and represents the respective cultural perspectives when it comes to gender expectations as well as roles. [16]

3)   Technology and leadership:

Commission on the Status of Women, or CSW67, held last year highlighted that progress toward gender equality in technology and innovation remains slow [17]. As of 2022, 63% [18] of women were using the internet globally, compared with 69% of men. In low-income countries, the number of women connected stands at just 20%.

However gender inequality in technology stretches beyond the issue of connectivity. Globally, 16% to 58% [19] of women have experienced online or tech-facilitated gender-based violence, while some 85% of women [20] have witnessed harassment and online violence against other women. The advent of artificial intelligence poses additional challenges — with systems often reflecting gender biases and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. [21]

Female employees often face stereotypical views that consider them less competent in technical

skills. This leads to fewer promotion opportunities and less recognition for their achievements. An example of this is the Google Memo controversy in 2017, where a male engineer claimed that biological differences were why women performed less well in technical roles. This incident highlights the need for cultural change within technology companies.

First, it's important not just to see women and girls as users of technology. Women are rarely viewed and empowered as creators of technology, promoters, and decision-makers in that field, which limits their ability to create technology that responds to the needs and priorities of women and girls. That's how we ended up with technology that is less used by women– it's not relevant to their needs.

One assumption is that the use of digital tools will increase for everyone with universal internet access. But what we see is that 76% of the population living in least developed countries are covered by mobile broadband signals, but only 25% are online, and out of those 25%, men are 52% more likely to be online than women. So, infrastructure alone is not sufficient to reach meaningful access for women. Other critical factors are affordability, digital literacy, privacy, safety, content, relevance, ownership, awareness about tools, agency, or even access to electricity.

Women and girls have made significant contributions to human innovation, yet remain underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). They are only 35 per cent of students in STEM education. Women hold less than one third of positions in the technology sector and only 22 percent of jobs in the artificial intelligence (AI) arena.

The result of these discrepancies is seen not only in the casual misogyny of the high-tech workplace, from which women continue to drop out at alarming rates, but also in the products and services being produced by high-tech firms, with unconscious bias and inequality quite literally written into the code of the most broadly used technologies.

Promoting female leadership in the technology industry is essential for innovation, economic growth, and social justice. This requires joint efforts from companies, governments, educational institutions, and individuals. It is time for change, and that change begins with all of us. [22]

4) Political Representation and Decision-Making

Over the past few decades, institutional barriers to women's political participation have diminished worldwide, leading to a significant rise in the number of women elected to public office. Despite this progress, women continue to encounter entrenched challenges in seeking, securing, holding, and thriving in political office. These barriers have profound consequences for democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) initiatives that aim to foster meaningful female political participation.

The global share of elected positions held by women surged from 13% to 25% during the first 20 years of the 21st century. This increase can be attributed in part to institutional and legal reforms, such as the adoption of electoral gender quotas, which are now in place in various forms across approximately 121 countries. However, despite these advances, women still face systemic obstacles at every stage of the electoral process, as outlined below.

a) Barriers to Entry: Identifying Aspirants

Socioeconomic and cultural factors significantly reduce the likelihood of women running for office compared to men. Limited access to education, financial resources, and the disproportionate burden of household and childcare responsibilities often hinder women's ability to engage in political life. Deeply ingrained cultural norms further discourage women from entering politics. For instance, in Cambodia, cultural guidelines like Chab Srey ("Rules for Women"), which prescribe traditional gender roles, serve as a deterrent to aspiring female politicians.

b) Challenges During Campaigns

Women who decide to run for office face significant barriers during their campaigns. One major hurdle is limited access to campaign financing, which stems from a lack of personal resources, limited property ownership, and exclusion from influential networks that support political campaigns. Additionally, gender stereotypes impose further constraints, as women candidates often feel pressured to frame their campaigns in ways that align with societal expectations. For example, female candidates in Sri Lanka report relying on campaign slogans that reinforce gender norms, such as "from the kitchen to your local council." Striking a balance between promoting progressive political agendas and navigating a male-dominated electorate adds

another layer of difficulty.

c) Post-Election Obstacles

Once elected, female politicians frequently face marginalization by male colleagues and exclusion from male-dominated intra-party networks. Balancing professional demands with childcare and domestic responsibilities compounds these challenges, often leading to decreased political engagement and motivation. Moreover, women elected through gender quotas often experience stigmatization. In Catalonia, for example, female legislators have reported being labeled as "quota women," undermining their legitimacy. Similarly, in Tanzania, women Members of Parliament face perceptions of being "second-class" legislators due to gender quotas. This hostile environment also extends to the legislation sponsored by female leaders, which may be viewed with skepticism or undervalued.

d) Barriers to Advancement: Upward Mobility and Promotion

Women in politics are often confined to lower-ranking positions within political parties. Male counterparts, with greater access to elite networks and accumulated political capital, are better positioned to leverage their roles for career advancement. This results in a significant imbalance of resources, creating an "executive glass ceiling" that prevents women from attaining prestigious leadership roles. Even when women do secure cabinet positions, they are more likely to be assigned portfolios perceived as less influential, such as education and culture, while men dominate high-profile roles like finance and defense. Furthermore, women who ascend to leadership roles often face the "glass cliff" phenomenon, where they are appointed during times of crisis, setting them up as potential scapegoats for failure.

These structural and cultural barriers significantly impede the equitable political participation of women, undermining efforts to achieve gender equality and inclusive governance worldwide.

5) Women's representation as decision makers in Media:

The media are potentially powerful channels of information in a society. The messages they transmit can change or reinforce social mores and behaviors, and mobilize citizens to take progressive actions. While, ideally, the media should strive for accuracy and impartiality, in

reality there are often imbalances in coverage, including in terms of women and their perspectives. Women politicians, for example, may be under-represented in news before and after elections. There can be a strong preoccupation with women as mainly victims or celebrities. Women hold only 22% of strategic decision-making posts in the public media and only 12% in the private media organizations in the EU-27– as the research of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) shows.

EIGE's report points out that the organizational culture within media structures remains largely masculine, despite the fact that women considerably outnumber men in university-level education in this field and constitute nearly half the workforce within the media industry. Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in decision-making structures, both at operational levels as senior managers and at strategic levels, as chief executive officers and board members of major media organizations across the EU Member States.

There is a significant difference between the private and public media sectors. In public media organizations the ratio of women to men occupying strategic decision-making positions is only **1 in 5**, whereas in private media organizations it decreases to only **1 in 10**. Within the decision-making boards of media organizations women represent only 25% of all members. [24]

Despite the undeniable contributions of the media to advancing women's rights, challenges persist. Limited access to resources, sexual harassment, and training for female journalists, particularly in community media, poses obstacles to storytelling. Gender biases and stereotypes within the media itself can perpetuate harmful narratives and under represent women's stories.

Increased inclusion of women in leadership positions across all divides is essential to ensure a more balanced and representative society that champions the rights of women inspiring inclusion.

Case Studies and Global Best Practices

1)   Rwanda

Since 1994, Rwanda has emerged as a continental role model for its dedication to gender equity. The World Economic Forum's 2022 Global Gender Gap Index ranks Rwanda in the top 10 (6th out of 146), making it one of only two African countries ranked as such since 2018.

However, progress is unequal across all dimensions of gender equity as the United Nations Development Programme ranked Rwanda 165th out of 191 countries as measured by the Gender Inequality Index in the 2021 Human Development Report. Though challenges remain, Rwanda has proven to be a pioneer for progress on gender equity. [25]

2)   South Africa & Uganda

There are more women in politics in Uganda and South Africa today than in many more developed democracies. This significant achievement owes to explicit affirmative action interventions in political institutions and processes to favor women's participation.

In Uganda and South Africa, gender-sensitive structural and cultural changes in the institutions of rule have been needed in order to bring more women into politics. However, that is just the first step.

It cannot be assumed that women politicians are necessarily committed to representing women's interests; indeed, few of them will have succeeded in politics by promoting a feminist platform.

Much more critical to the promotion of gender equity in economic development policy than the number of women in power is the character and capacity of the state; whether it promotes class and gender equity in social and economic policy, and has the capacity to implement such policies even against the resistance of dominant patriarchal interests both in society and in the institutions of the state itself. In the current environment of intolerance of any restraint on the free functioning of markets, to which liberal democracy is the handmaiden, the room for promoting women's interests in economic policy-making can be limited. [26]

3)   Nordic Countries

Scandinavia is a region of northern Europe that includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. With slightly more than 20 million people, Scandinavia comprises small, relatively homogeneous "societies with relatively high standards of living, a fairly common historical tradition and culture, and emphasis on Protestantism, democracy, and social welfare".

During the 1970s, increasing education, declining birth rates, and a higher cost of living pushed many women into the workforce. But unlike other Western countries, women's political progress in Scandinavia proceeded faster than improvements within the family or the workforce [27].

As of August 2023, all five Nordic countries had a share of around 45 percent of women on their parliaments. Iceland was the Nordic country with the highest share of women in the parliament, slightly edging Sweden and Finland at 46 percent. Denmark had the lowest share of female parliamentarians. Although there has generally been more male prime ministers than female prime ministers in the Nordic countries, in August 2023, two of five of the prime ministers were women. [28]

Another impressive political accomplishment of women in Scandinavia is that they have been able to break out of the areas traditionally staffed by women, such as education and family policy, holding cabinet positions in industry, energy, defense, environmental affairs, and justice.

4)   France

France was the first country to introduce a legislative quota of 50% for Parliament in the year 2000. Women ministers increased from 34% to 46% from 2010-2017, and women members of parliament from 20% to 38%. Since 2000, ten other Member States have introduced legislative gender quotas for parliamentary elections. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), these countries have increased the share of women in their parliaments almost three times faster than countries without quotas. The proportion of women in parliaments increased more quickly in Ireland, Spain, Luxembourg, Poland and Slovenia after they adopted quotas. (31)

The French Constitution was amended in 2000 to promote parity in elected bodies, meaning equal access for women and men to elected positions. Laws have been passed to enforce this

principle, including:

- **Ballot Rules:** In two-round list systems, parity is mandated, requiring that 50% of candidates on each side of the ballot be of each gender.

- **Financial Penalties:** In single-round list systems, political groups and parties failing to meet the 50% gender balance rules face monetary fines.

- **Electoral Laws (2013):** A law was introduced requiring a "mixed ticket" system, mandating that local councilor candidates include one man and one woman.

- **Restrictions on Multiple Mandates (2014):** Legislation was passed to limit elected representatives from holding multiple mandates simultaneously, promoting more equitable representation. [29]

In 2012, a new law was implemented imposing a 40% gender quota to be reached by 2018 for nominations to executive functions in the public service. This quota applies to administrative and supervisory boards of public institutions, high councils, juries and selection committees in public service procedures. Equality is one of the fundamental ideals underpinning the French Constitution. The principle of gender equality was introduced in the Preamble to the 1946 Constitution, which, like the 1958 Constitution, referenced the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.

France has a tradition of gender equality legislation in employment and professional life. Beginning with the Law of 22 December on equal pay in 1972, at least 12 laws were adopted on the topic prior to 2014, including the 1983 Law on professional equality. Although France has a record of gender equality legislation, the Law on professional equality between women and men, adopted in 2000, was the first law to integrate gender equality concerns outside gender equality policy areas. In 2021, France passed the Rixain law, which imposes mandatory gender quotas on executive committees of companies with more than 1,000 employees. The law requires 30% of executive committee members to be women by March 2026 and 40% by March 2029. [30]

France has made significant progress in gender equality, ranking second on the Gender Equality Index with a notable improvement in the domain of power due to economic decision-making quotas. However, challenges persist in the domains of work and health, where France ranks 14th in the EU. In the workplace, progress on participation and job quality has not fully addressed systemic barriers.

Domestic responsibilities reveal a stark gender gap, with women disproportionately engaging in care and housework, contributing to a heavier mental load. Despite quotas achieving numerical gender balance, workplace culture and systemic inequalities outside work remain unaddressed, exacerbating pressures on women. Additionally, time spent with children by mothers in France shows a declining trend, bucking the norm in other high-income nations.

While quotas are a vital starting point, they need to be part of a broader, coordinated policy effort addressing systemic issues and fostering societal change for true gender equality. [31]

5)   MENA Region

While women's political representation has shown improvement, it remains below the critical 30% threshold established by the Beijing Platform for Action as a benchmark for meaningful political and legislative participation. Algeria stands out as the only country in the MENA region to have achieved this target.

Several countries are taking proactive measures to address the underrepresentation of women in politics. Tunisia, for example, has enshrined the principle of gender equality in elected councils within its Constitution. Similarly, Morocco has implemented parliamentary quotas to promote women's participation. However, ensuring the sustainability of these initiatives and achieving consistent progress across the region requires further concerted efforts.

The proportion of women ministers also remains low across most MENA countries. When women do attain ministerial positions, they are frequently assigned to "soft" portfolios, such as those related to social policies, rather than being entrusted with key economic or decision-making roles.

Encouraging progress is visible in narrowing the gender gap within the judiciary, particularly in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Despite these advancements, significant disparities persist, with women holding only a limited number of senior judicial positions. In some countries, such as Bahrain and Yemen, women's access to judicial careers continues to face formal restrictions.

Women's participation in civil society is comparatively robust in the Arab region. This was notably evident during recent uprisings, where women and men engaged equally in advocating for greater transparency and accountability. However, women remain underrepresented in

leadership roles within civil society organizations, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to promote their inclusion at decision-making levels.

In certain MENA countries, restrictions on women's freedom of movement further hinder their ability to fully engage in public and economic life. Requirements for a husband's or guardian's permission to obtain a passport, travel abroad, or choose a place of residence remain in place in some states, reinforcing barriers to gender equality. These restrictions, along with others outlined in this report, continue to limit women's opportunities to participate meaningfully in both public and private spheres.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, combining legal reforms, institutional support, and cultural shifts to ensure women's equitable participation across all sectors of society in the MENA region. [32]

HR Policies Contributing to Gender Inequality:

Gender inequality in organizations is a complex phenomenon that can be seen in organizational structures, processes, and practices. For women, some of the most harmful gender inequalities are enacted within human resources (HRs) practices. This is because HR practices (i.e., policies, decision-making, and their enactment) affect the hiring, training, pay, and promotion of women. Human resource policies that are inherently biased against a group of people, regardless of their job-related knowledge, skills, abilities, and performance can be termed institutional discrimination.

Institutional discrimination against women can occur in each type of HR policy from the recruitment and selection of an individual into an organization, through his/her role assignments, training, pay, performance evaluations, promotion, and termination. For instance, if women are under-represented in a particular educational program or a particular job type and those credentials or previous job experience are required to be considered for selection, women are being systematically, albeit perhaps not intentionally, discriminated against. In another example, there is gender discrimination if a test is used in the selection battery for which greater gender differences emerge, than those that emerge for job performance ratings. [33]

In terms of representation, gender inequality in organizational structures translates into HR practices and impacts directly on women's representation within leadership and decision-making positions.

Institutional discrimination ingrained in recruitment, training, and promotion policies systematically disadvantages women. For instance, qualifications or the required experiences that are predominantly male-dominated tend to exclude most able women from such roles of leadership. Moreover, the role assignment biases and favorable access to opportunities that advance careers through high-visibility projects or specialized training to some members limit the experience of women in leadership positions. These HR practices put a cycle where fewer women ascend for the decision-making position, reinforce stereotypes about leadership as a manly affair, and hinder progress toward equitable governance. Addressing all these systemic barriers is important to the creation of an inclusive environment that fosters diversity in leadership.

Factors Influencing Women's Agency and Power in Decision-Making

Too often, strategies to support women's decision-making focus on institutions, structures or capabilities in isolation, with limited appreciation of the linkages between them. This is problematic because how particular capabilities, institutions and social structures combine and interact shapes women's actual influence in decision-making processes. These relationships are the political economy of women's decision-making. They help explain variations in women's political power and leadership, such as:

1) **Inequalities between women:**

Adverse gender norms affect all women – but how they affect them depends on other structural factors. Gendered barriers to political power are compounded for women who are disadvantaged by their class, ethnicity, religion, age or sexuality. Women from marginalized social groups are less likely than those from dominant social groups to have the social and economic assets to

enable them to take advantage of new opportunities for political power.

2)   **Variations between countries**

Variations between countries also have different social, economic and political conditions that combine in different ways to enable or constrain women's agency and leadership. Multiple pathways to women's political power have emerged from these differences. For example, in Western social democracies, left-of-center and socially progressive parties have driven large increases in women's representation in national parliaments, even in the absence of quotas. In sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, women's activism around quotas in post-conflict political negotiations has been critical.

3)   **Deviation between formal and actual power**

The political economy of decision-making also explains why formal authority or positions of power do not always give women substantive influence over private and public decisions that affect their lives. Informal norms and practices influence how formal laws and regulations work. Gender and other social norms are 'sticky' (Mackay, 2014), and typically mean women are unable to exercise power on the same terms as men even after reforms to discriminatory laws.

For example, women activists may be unable to attend political meetings in the evening because of domestic responsibilities, or male MPs may use sexual harassment to dominate female MPs. In addition, behind-the-scenes deliberations can be as important determinants of what public officials decide and why as public deliberations. For example, party positions may be decided in private social spaces that (formally or informally) exclude women, such as bars or sports clubs, and/or a parliament or board may simply rubber-stamp decisions already taken in private discussion   between   the   most   powerful   players.   [34]

Effects of Gender Inequity

Gender inequity in leadership and decision making has a myriad of consequences. There are economic, social and political repercussions. This lack of voice functions as a critical factor in the maintenance of gender inequity and poverty, effectively blocking women's access to

decisionmaking and agenda-setting processes, and beyond that, opportunities for leading these processes.

This situation contributes to an invisibility of women as public actors and constitutes a negation of their rights to equal participation. It also perpetuates a decision-making process which is less likely to represent women's interests than a more representative system and which, therefore, possesses neither the vision nor the motivation to challenge or change unequal gender relations in society. Not only is women's participation and leadership an essential prerequisite for poverty alleviation and tackling gender inequality, it is also a basic human right.

1) Economic institutions:

 In the field of economics and finance, women remain sorely underrepresented in decision-making in institutions at local, national, and international levels. At government level, only 14 percent of finance ministers are female (28 across 193 countries). International institutions, which shape economic and social policy in developing countries, have few women leaders. The effect of this is that trade unions, co-operatives, and other producer associations, which are meant to uphold and represent the rights of all workers, often have few women in positions of power (unless they are dedicated women's co-operatives). Trade unions in particular are very male-dominated, with the result that the particular needs and priorities of women workers are often ignored.

2) Effect of inequality in workplace and labor market:

Another effect of gender inequity in positions of leadership and decision making is that when women aren't treated fairly in the processes described, they're not likely to stick around. Their chief concern is lack of advancement or the perception that they won't be able to keep growing at their current employer.

One study found that women in both public- and private-sector jobs were significantly less satisfied with their promotion opportunities than men were, which prompted them to leave at a higher rate. Studies of "up-or-out" professions such as consulting and law, however, have shown that junior women are less likely to leave if other women hold senior positions; their presence in

the upper ranks demonstrates that career progression is possible. Many women also leave their jobs after realizing that they're paying the "motherhood penalty"—they get fewer opportunities and lower wages than childless women or men (even those who are fathers) because they are presumed to be less committed to work. The stigma surrounding flexibility and other family accommodation policies can also derail women's careers even if they manage to hang on to their jobs. Women working flexible schedules tend to be seen as less committed and less motivated than those working standard hours, even when their actual performance is identical. [35]

Lack of women leadership means that women can often face more bullying in the workplace, the workforces is less diverse at the top, and that the mental well-being of female employees can suffer too as they feel discriminated against and do not have the same opportunities to progress. The lack of women leaders also creates a paucity of role models that can inspire other women to enter and stay in the workforce.

Studies have shown that unconscious bias is rife in the workplace. Gender stereotypes, in particular, are everywhere. It is in the language that we use, and it is the way we perceive women in the workplace.

3) Political representation effects

With the historical imbalance in the capture of key positions, decision-making roles and resources, both at home and in public, one gender has been able to bargain for itself the ability to cast greater influence and to position itself as a 'center of power' that can address and fulfill the needs of a constituency. Patriarchy has thus influenced the structure, actors and norms of politics, as well as determined the power dynamics therein.

Thus, patriarchy affects fair representation of women and other marginalized persons in politics, and hinders intersectional representation in the political domain. It also hinders the advancement of women who are in politics, and may make them more susceptible to sexist abuse. This likely aims to reinforce and maintain the status quo of dominance that privileges one gender, by reminding the other that the public space is not their domain and, should they dare cross over, they should be prepared for the consequences. The control of men over decisions and access to resources did not remain within the private sphere alone, rather, it led to their control of resources and positions in the public sphere as well. This included the political arena as well as

the executive, legislative and judicial organs of the state.

Consequently, the social, legal, economic and political structures have become male-centered, male-identified and male-dominated. This hinders women from exercising their rights to participate in political and public life and has wider consequences for societies: it undermines public institutions, weakens policy outcomes, and impedes progress in peace and development. [36]

Future Plans & Policy Recommendations

1) Legislative reforms:

In the political sphere, the way elections are organized and run, especially in the selection of candidates, presents women with electoral reform that can provide new opportunities for women seeking to become leaders in the political arena. The implementation of quotas and reservation of seats have been the key instruments in increasing women's political representation, and over 40 countries have adopted quota laws to regulate the selection or election of women to political office.

Lobbying for the implementation or extension of quotas for women candidates has formed a central part of the programme's long-term work on women's participation and leadership, as has educating women voters about legislative changes, to encourage them to realize their right to participate in elections. Policies of decentralization have been of particular significance in increasing women's representation at the local level.

These give local and regional governments (rather than central government) the power to make decisions about local services, such as health, education, and sanitation. Because it is often easier for women to get elected at local level than at national level, decentralization can give women real influence over decisions which will have a direct impact on the lives of members of their communities.

However, simply have a quota law doesn't indicate a natural increase in women participation in politics– it pushes out others.

2) Political parties:

Political parties' rules and norms, along with the country's social culture and electoral system affect the recruitment and selection process at different stages and influence the degree of openness to women candidates. Among the most important criteria for enhancing women's representation in the parliament are the nomination procedure (patronage vs. bureaucratic based) design of electoral system (proportional vs. plurality/majority system), type of electoral list, setting of clear rules for candidate selection to name a few. Political parties can:

- create discussion and lobbying platforms for women
- set aside special funds for women;
- establish women wings and committees;
- establish women only parties [37]

3) Economic Reforms

An important first step in strengthening women's opportunities to participate in decision-making and to attain leadership positions in the economic sector is making their contributions to that sector visible.

- **Financial Inclusion**: Support efforts to increase women's access to quality financial services, such as credits, savings, insurance, and payment systems through better regulation, technology, and financial literacy.

- **Women and Agriculture**: Highlight women's vital role in advancing agricultural development and food security, and encourage policy and programmatic support for female farmers and agricultural businesses owned by women.

- **Enterprise Growth**: Support NGOs, industry associations, and corporations advocating for policy and programmatic solutions that enable women's economic participation, including reforming discriminatory laws and practices that hinder access to capital, land tenure, and inheritance rights, and encouraging a policy climate conducive to the growth of women-run SMEs.

- **Technology Access**: Close the gender gap in access to mobile phones, the Internet, and other vital technologies by addressing cultural, financial, educational, and motivational barriers.

- **Capacity Building**: Provide capacity building, training, and mentoring programs to women and girls and equip them with market information, entrepreneurship opportunities, and the necessary skills to attain economic independence, for example, through our Pathways to Prosperity and African Women Entrepreneurs Program.

- **Business Leadership**: Encourage best practices to increase women's representation in senior management positions, including on corporate boards.

- **Data Collection**: Promote the collection and alignment of gender-sensitive data in the economic sector to create evidence-based policy and programs aimed at increasing women's economic participation across all sectors. [38]

4) Educational reforms:

Providing targeted training to women who want to assume positions of leadership is one way of enabling more women to influence decision-making processes.

Such campaigns are often vital in contexts where poor women in particular may have little awareness of their rights as voters and as citizens. Due to lack of literacy skills and their exclusion from channels of information, they may not have any way of finding out about these rights for themselves. For instance, some of the women community leaders who took part in training in Sierra Leone were not even aware that they had the right to vote, let alone stand for election. [39]

The existing disparities in leadership roles and compensation are clear indicators that more effort is necessary to bridge the gender gap. Young women, in particular, stand to benefit from educational initiatives that impart vital leadership qualities. These qualities are not only crucial for personal growth but also for effecting positive change in workplaces, organizations, and nations. The importance of focusing on female leadership in educational programmes cannot be overstated.

As the demand for female leaders continues to rise, initiatives offer young women the opportunity to prepare themselves for leadership roles that can shape a more inclusive and equitable future for all. Through education and determination, women can break free from the constraints of the past and pave the way for a brighter tomorrow where their voices are heard, and their leadership is celebrated. Education has been a catalyst for social mobility, enabling women to break free from traditional gender roles and achieve economic independence. By acquiring knowledge and skills, women have been able to access a wider range of opportunities in various fields, including academia, healthcare, politics, and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, education has played a crucial role in enhancing women's decision-making capabilities and agency within their families and communities. Educated women are more likely to make informed choices about their health, family planning, and livelihoods, contributing to improved

outcomes for themselves and their families.

Moreover, educated women serve as role models and agents of change, inspiring future generations and challenging societal norms and stereotypes. Promoting gender equality in education requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses structural barriers, changes societal attitudes, and empowers girls and women to assert their rights. Key strategies include:

- Policy advocacy and legal reforms to enforce gender-sensitive legislation and ensure equal access to education for all.

- Investment in infrastructure and resources, including schools, toilets, and educational materials, particularly in underserved areas.

- Teacher training and capacity-building programs to promote gender-sensitive teaching practices and create inclusive classroom environments

- Comprehensive sexuality education and menstrual health management programs to address taboo topics and promote reproductive health rights for girls.

- Economic empowerment initiatives for women and girls, including vocational training, entrepreneurship opportunities, and access to microfinance

- Engaging men and boys as allies in the fight for gender equality, challenging harmful gender norms, and promoting positive masculinity. (40)

5) Technological Solutions

In this digital era, women are required to be agile and have fluency in many aspects of digital leadership. A "digitalised" woman in leadership cannot be reachable if the basic and fundamental aspects such as skills and appropriate education are not being catered for. Some solution oriented approaches for this are:

- **Facilitating digital inclusion**: The first strategy is to facilitate digital inclusion, democratizing access to tech training and education to narrow the digital divide and make sure nobody gets left behind in the digital space.

- **Start early: Educate women about careers in technology**: "Female advancements in tech won't happen in a vacuum," writes Anna Convery-Pelletier, who was named Woman of the Year in Technology by Women in Technology. "Representation matters; girls can't be what they can't see. It's vital that young(er) girls and women see — and have access to — role models whom they can relate to."

  In order to bring more women into tech leadership positions, they first need to know that these opportunities exist. That means educating them early about career and learning options available to them. That way, they gain both the interest and skills to succeed in tech from a young age and are primed to excel in STEM careers

- **Challenging the Status Quo**: Female leaders in the domain of tech policy can challenge the status quo and inspire change. By breaking barriers and setting new standards, they empower other women and underrepresented groups, fostering a culture of inclusivity and progressive change in the technology sector.

- **Educate tech leaders on the benefits of diversity in the workforce**: As Corinne Post, Boris Lokshin and Christophe Boone wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*, "Firms with more women in senior positions are more profitable, more socially responsible and provide safer, higher-quality customer experiences — among many other benefits."

  Leaders from all backgrounds have a responsibility to learn about the tangible benefits of hiring a diverse workforce. They must read the literature and research on the subject and partner with outside organizations that aim to promote diversity.

- **Provide more mentorship opportunities for women at every level**: Just over half of business professionals say they have had a mentor, according to an Olivet Nazarene University survey. But 82% of male respondents said they've had a male mentor, while only 69% of women have had a female mentor.

  We know mentorship has a huge impact on professional development for both mentors and mentees. In fact, a study from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations found that mentoring programs significantly

improved promotion and retention rates for minorities and women compared to other types of diversity initiatives. To attract more women to the tech field and bring them to the executive level, it's critical to provide sponsorship and mentorship opportunities for women at all levels. [41]

Questions A Resolution Must Answer

- What structural, legal, and societal obstacles prevent the equitable participation of women in decision-making processes globally?

- How does the intersection of gender with other social factors such as economic status, ethnicity, and education affect leadership opportunities?

- How have global agreements such as CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration, and SDG 5 influenced efforts to achieve gender equity in governance and policy-making?

- What gaps remain in the implementation of international frameworks to ensure effective progress toward gender parity?

- What strategies have proven effective in increasing the representation of women in political leadership roles across different regions?

- In what ways do cultural attitudes and societal norms hinder or support the advancement of women in leadership roles?

- What initiatives can effectively challenge and transform harmful stereotypes and biases regarding women in leadership?

- How can access to resources such as education, credit, and childcare be expanded to support women's leadership development?

- How can digital tools and platforms be utilized to amplify women's voices and representation in leadership roles?

- What mechanisms are effective in monitoring progress toward gender equity in leadership and governance?

- How can sustainable practices be developed to ensure that gender equity initiatives continue to evolve and adapt to changing societal needs?

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Additional: Monthly Ranking of women in parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union. https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_month=1&date_year=2024)